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Jews in Ethiopia: U.S. Cared This Time

By Wolf Blitzer

Today's direct and very active cooperation by the U.S. government in helping to rescue Ethiopian Jews is in marked contrast to the documented abandonment of European Jewish refugees before and during World War II.

U.S. involvement was dramatically underscored in recent weeks by the C-130 military transport airlift of hundreds of stranded Ethiopian Jews from camps in the Sudan to Israel. This was a combined State Department-Pentagon-Central Intelligence Agency operation that was actively promoted by Vice President Bush and personally authorized by President Reagan. It was extremely sensitive, both diplomatically and militarily. But it was only the culmination of a critical and extremely supportive U.S. involvement with Israel and others for more than a year to bring Ethiopian Jews to Israel.

The use of U.S. planes was necessitated after Israel's chartering of Belgian planes was suspended in early January. That followed Israel's ill-fated confirmation of an airlift of Ethiopian Jews to Israel.

There have been several important developments over the past 40 years that have resulted in this remarkable change of governmental attitude in Washington. They suggest that lessons of the Holocaust have indeed been learned.

First, Israel exists today as a guaranteed haven for all Jewish refugees. This, after all, is Israel's raison d'etre. There was no such country in the 1930s and 1940s willing to accept masses of European Jews. Six million died, one out of every three Jews then living in the world.

In a very practical way, the fact that Israel is willing to welcome Ethiopian Jewish refugees has made U.S. governmental cooperation in facilitating their rescue so much easier. U.S. domestic political considerations involving immigration quotas and unemployment rates are thus avoided. These were among some of the major factors that precluded the U.S. from opening its doors to European Jewry during the war, a point well-documented in David S. Wyman's recently published book "The Abandonment of the Jews."

Had Israel existed then, Washington no doubt would have been more willing to help get endangered Jews there.

Second, the U.S. Jewish community has become significantly more self-confident and politically powerful over the past half-century. Jewish organizational clout today is an important force in Washington—something that the executive branch of the U.S. government cannot ignore.

U.S. Jews, moreover, never again want to be accused of not having done enough to help save fellow Jews—allegations that were hurled after 1945.

Third, the State Department of today is not the State Department of the 1930s and 1940s. It is no longer the elitist, largely white Anglo-Saxon Protestant operation it once was. For one thing, there are many Jews who work in the State Department today. They understandably and unashamedly have shown an automatically greater sensitivity to the plight of their fellow Jews around the world.

In the past several months, in this regard, several young Jewish foreign-service officers and political appointees in the State Department's bureaus of African Affairs, Refugee Affairs, Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs, and elsewhere were personally very active in making sure that the U.S. was doing everything possible to help save Ethiopian Jews. They did so in the best professional manner—quietly, behind the scenes, with no fanfare or publicity. They would not let the issue die.

They, of course, had the blessings of Messrs. Reagan and Bush and Secretary of State George Shultz. They also had the critical support of many non-Jewish U.S. diplomats serving in Washington and out in the field, especially in Ethiopia and the Sudan. Some, motivated strictly by humanitarian concerns, took courageous steps to save Ethiopian Jews. Their full stories—in the best tradition of Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg who personally saved many Hungarian Jews during World War II—will be told one day.

There have been other allies in this current struggle. There were, for instance, many direct representations from Democrats and Republicans on Capitol Hill urging a more assertive U.S. approach toward the Ethiopian Jewry issue. This congressional involvement was significant in reinforcing the Reagan administration's general policy orientation.

Thus, there was virtually no concern in the White House of any domestic political fallout or financial costs the U.S. might incur in the process. The involvement was basically seen as a popular move at home even if there were very sensitive foreign-policy ramifications involving U.S. relations with Arab and African states.

In the 1930s there was no similar informal network of influential U.S. politicians and bureaucrats—Jews and non-Jews alike—willing to take the lead in saving Europe's Jews. The end result was very painful. Times, fortunately, have changed.

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